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Argentina: The Montoneros and the New Government (U) 5
Jay Grusin, 351-7231

The Montoneros, the Peronist leftwing terrorist organization decimated by security forces in the late 1970s, are trying to make a political comeback, but they have little prospect for significant gains any time soon. 3.5(c)

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Briefs

Articles have been coordinated as appropriate with other offices within CIA. Comments and queries regarding this publication may be directed to the Chief, Production Staff, Office of African and Latin American Analysis, telephone

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Argentina: The Montoneros and the New Government

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The Montoneros, the Peronist leftwing terrorist organization that was decimated by security forces in the late 1970s, are trying to make a political comeback. In the wake of President Alfonsin's stunning defeat of the Peronist party and the overall poor showing of the left in the 30 October general elections, Montonero leaders have apparently decided against the use of violence—at least for now. The Montoneros reportedly intend to focus on more conventional tactics, such as infiltrating labor and political organizations and strengthening their position within the Peronist party. Their goals are to move the Peronist party leftward and to splinter Alfonsin's electoral coalition, but we see little prospect for significant gains on either front any time soon.

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The Montoneros, who first emerged in 1970, were used by party chief Juan Peron against the incumbent military regime. They split with Peron over tactics and ideology after he became President in 1973, however, and were banished from party ranks in 1975 by his widow and successor, Isabel. Although they became one of Argentina's most notorious terrorist groups, they were soundly defeated after the military took over in 1976; those not captured or killed were forced into exile. Claiming to represent the true voice of Peronism, they dubbed their group the Peronist Montonero Party and embarked on a propaganda campaign against the military.

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officials recently estimated there were 500 abroad and 300 in country, but we believe this count is considerably exaggerated.

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The Election Impact

The Montoneros apparently saw the presidential election campaign last year as an opportunity to reassert themselves within the Peronist party.

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exiled terrorist leader Mario Firmenich contacted then Army commander Nicolaides in an effort to negotiate a return to legitimate political activity. On several occasions, he and his colleagues reentered Argentina clandestinely for brief visits.

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Meanwhile, Montoneros inside the country interrupted television broadcasts a number of times with political messages backing leftist Peronist candidates. Sympathizers also distributed pamphlets criticizing the military.

The impressive size of Alfonsin's mandate, coupled with the poor showing by the left, seems to have convinced most Montonero leaders that political action now provides the best means for achieving their goals, although some undisciplined factions may still resort to violence on occasion. A secret Montonero assessment,

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concluded that the new President's program had effectively co-opted potential leftist supporters. The document further revealed the Montoneros' fear that terrorism might prompt a military backlash, thus threatening the civilians' tenure in office. According to another document, the Montoneros planned to speed up infiltration of leftist political and labor organizations and hoped to make inroads into rural and agricultural unions as well. They intend to mobilize support for job actions should the new government, as expected, turn down demands for large wage hikes. Furthermore, they are seeking ways to split Alfonsin's diverse electoral coalition.

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Since Alfonsin's inauguration in early December, the Montoneros' effort to increase their influence reportedly has intensified. Their main target,

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is the radical left wing of the Peronist movement—the Peronist Intransigent Mobilization Party—led by well-known Montonero sympathizer Vicente Saadi.

his leftwing newspaper, *La Voz*, is funded by the Montoneros and, as of at least mid-1983, his personal income was subsidized by the

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group. The leftists therefore apparently believe he will use his newly won Senate seat and his post as head of the Peronist bloc in the Senate to further their interests [redacted] 3.5(c)

Similarly, the Montoneros have stepped up their public criticism of the Peronist party's rightwing leadership, blaming it for the party's defeat [redacted] 3.3(b)(1) the Montoneros intend to try to unseat them and to challenge moderates for control of the party. [redacted] 3.5(c)

To further their objectives, exiled Montonero leaders prepared to return to Argentina soon after the election. The US defense attache in La Paz reported that 20 to 30 members met overtly there to discuss reentry. In December, following an open letter to Alfonsin announcing the organization's intention to pursue peaceful political objectives, two Montonero leaders—former governors Ricardo Obregon Cano and Oscar Bidegain—arrived in Buenos Aires. [redacted]

The government, however, has already taken a tough stand against the Montoneros. Obregon Cano and Bidegain were arrested soon after returning, making good Alfonsin's public pledge to hold the former terrorists —like the military—accountable for crimes committed during the 1970s. The President, reiterating his campaign promise to prevent a resurgence of terrorism, plans to press for stringent countersubversive legislation. Moreover, recent statements by government officials suggest that Alfonsin intends to preserve—at least for now—the military's ability to gather intelligence on terrorist capabilities. [redacted] 3.5(c)

Prospects Dim

We believe the Montoneros have little prospect of achieving significant political gains in the near term and that any violence will be swiftly contained. Alfonsin's antisubversive measures deprive them of the opportunity to organize effectively within the country, and several key leaders have already put off their return. Moreover, the Peronist party leadership appears determined to isolate the radical left, especially Saadi, although the odds on success are uncertain. Isabel Peron, who for years did not exercise her powers as nominal president of the movement, has recently reasserted her authority and reaffirmed her rightwing supporters as the party's leaders. [redacted] 3.3(b)(1) she intends to contain Saadi, as well as other elected leftists, by helping to shape anti-left legislation. [redacted] 3.5(c)

The Montoneros probably will also receive less aid and support from foreign benefactors than they did during the military regime, thereby further cutting their potential capabilities:

- The Palestine Liberation Organization, which in the past provided the Montoneros with training and funds, refused appeals for aid in mid-1983, [redacted] 3.3(b)(1)
- Mexican officials, who had supported exiled Montoneros with safehaven and government jobs, are removing many from their posts and forcing them to leave Mexico, [redacted] 3.3(b)(1)
- The Cubans, perhaps the Montoneros' most important allies, are likely to maintain contacts but probably will hesitate to provide much more than low-level support for renewed terrorism, given Havana's interests in strengthening ties with the new civilian government.
- Bolivia's leftist President Siles probably will continue providing safehaven and moral support—the top two Montonero leaders were spotted moving freely in La Paz as recently as late December—but he is unlikely to permit use of his country as a base for guerrilla operations. [redacted] 3.5(c)

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